

## Military spouses worth more than dozen roses

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A dozen roses sat alone on the far side of the table, the red petals barely peeking over the glossy green wrapping paper held around the stems with a thin silver ribbon. Three feet away, the other side of the table was filled with the memories of a 24-year Air Force career.

A leather-bound book held pictures of days, places and people from long ago, a triangular case held the American flag, and another polished wood and glass case held scores of ribbons and metals earned during a successful military career.

On this particular day, people gathered in formation, salutes were exchanged and tears were shed with the dawning realization that a chapter had ended in a person's life. A long line formed as well wishers waited their turn to shake the hand of a senior master sergeant who was serving his last day of active duty. Some said thank you, some said congratulations, and others simply wished him good luck as he stood and greeted his friends and coworkers for the last time in uniform.

As the procession continued, three feet away a well-dressed woman waited patiently and spoke with the occasional passer by. After about 30 or so people had greeted the retiring sergeant, a young airman took the roses from the table top and placed them in the well-dressed woman's hands.

"These are for you," he said. "I hope you like them, we just got them from the florist this morning, they were the most expensive flowers in the store."

The airman quickly turned away to seek his place in the reception line, never stopping to notice the tear that fell from the woman's cheek onto the brightly wrapped roses she now held in her hands.

A dozen roses for 24 years as a faithful Air Force wife. One rose for every two years he served and she waited for him to come home.

I stood and wondered if there was a single petal for every deployment, exercise or week-long trip separating the woman from her husband while he served. I wondered if there was a thorn for every missed phone call or letter never sent while the sergeant was away. I wondered if the shiny green paper and silver ribbon made her feel any better about the countless nights when dinner had to be reheated in the microwave because duty called at five in the afternoon.

According to the Air Force Personnel Center, almost two-thirds of our active-duty Air Force is married. That means for every three airmen assigned to Operation Allied Force or on temporary duty somewhere around the world, two families are without a husband or wife. Countless numbers of bills will be paid and children driven to school by someone who is a married single parent. Yet miraculously, the divorce rate for Air Force members still falls below the nationwide average.

Today is Military Spouses Day, set aside to recognize the unique contributions of the husbands and wives of our military members. These are the people that keep the home fires burning when our military forces are keeping the peace thousands of miles away. These are the men and women who bring din-

ner in Tupperware bowls for flight crews working overtime for the fourth night in a row. These are the faithful spouses who help our children with their homework while mommy or daddy is away during a field exercise.

This is one day for each and every one of us wearing a uniform not to take our husbands and wives for granted. A day to tell them they're loved and respected for the hundreds of little things they do for us every day. A day to let them know how important their role is in this nation's defense.

As the Air Force implements the Aerospace Expeditionary Force concept over the next 18 months, the value of the military spouse will become even more evident. Any commander or first sergeant will tell you an airman can not perform their job as well when there are problems with the family at home. And the person who solves all the problems at home when mommy or daddy is away is the military spouse.

I encourage airmen to make this day special in some way for their husband or wife at home. Whether it's taking the family out for dinner, or staying at home eating microwave popcorn and watching a rented movie, do something to let your spouse know how much you care.

As for me, I'm buying roses. My wife has raised our two children, kept our house, and made sure the bills have gotten paid over a 14-month remote assignment and nine TDYs in our 10 years of being married. Besides, she really loves roses and I'm just making sure my retirement ceremony isn't the first time she gets them.

## Kunsan assignment teaches airman about mother's strength, love

By Senior Airman Laura Holzer  
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Mother's Day is usually another day when I send my mom flowers, a card and call her — the standard gifts I'd give on her birthday and any other holiday when card companies and florists profit. However, after a year at Kunsan, Mother's Day will not be the same for my mother or me again.

I haven't had the ideal relationship with my mom. We were perfect candidates for talk show topics like "My wild child," "My daughter needs boot camp" and "My mother is driving me crazy." Our relationship actually started getting better when I joined the Air Force and wasn't "under her roof."

I was excited to have an assignment to Korea. I got the chance to explore part of my heritage and see the country my mother was born and raised in. I thought that maybe I would understand her more by seeing how she grew up. Being here has not only shown me more about her, but now I see she's the strongest woman I've ever known.

I was impressed with the Korean work ethic. Koreans are very proud to have a job, whether it's being a secretary or working at the Jet Stream. I understood now why my mother endured so many factory jobs. Even today at 55 years old, she still works 12-hour shifts in the same sewing facto-

ry that she's worked at for more than 10 years.

I also noticed how Korean women dress conservatively. It explains why mom had issues with my "barely there" wardrobe.

Korea was my mother's home. Her education, friends, family and culture were here. When she fell in love with my father, who was also in the Air Force, she left it all behind to be with him. She married him and moved to the United States.

It sounds like a fairy-tale love story. However, a month after I turned 3 years old, my father died in a car accident. At the time, my mother didn't know much English because my father had always spoken Hangul. She didn't have a job or a driver's license. All she had was a daughter. Everything she knew was in Korea.

It's funny when you place things in a different perspective. I imagined what it would be like if I made a decision similar to my mom's to stay in America, however, mine would be to stay in Korea. I don't know the language, customs or laws. I would be leaving all my friends, family and everything I had worked for in the United States. I imagined leaving everything I knew to be with someone I loved, who would die shortly after making his country my new home.

My mother persevered. Instead of

flying back to her home (which is what I would have done), she stayed in the United States. With help from my father's close friends and family, she learned English. She got a job. She even got her driver's license. She has paid bills, bought food, clothes, a house and two cars on minimum wage. Despite all this, she still pulled off Christmas, Thanksgiving and birthdays, which she still continues.

I know I've been a pain in the neck. Yet through it all, she's still the first one to help me through any problem. She's taken care of me when I was sick. She's given me money when I didn't ask for it. She has done this for all 23 years of my life and never complained or wanted anything in return.

I know some people may think that's what a mother is supposed to do. But I've met some people that have not felt a mother's love. There are some who are not that fortunate to remember or know their mother.

I didn't want to send her the usual for Mother's Day so I asked my mom what she wanted this year.

She deserved more and I wanted to give her more, even though no amount of gifts or money could ever repay her for what she's endured and done for me.

"You're the greatest gift that was given to me," she said.

I realized it took this long to appreciate how special moms are. It took being stationed in another country to find out how extraordinary my mother is. But I'll be sure to tell her on Mother's Day, and everyday after that.

